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ABSTRACT

The Task Force on Resource Allocation for Program Evaluation was established by Division H of the American Educational Research Association at the 1978 Annual Meeting in Toronto. This paper presents the recommendations of the Task Force concerning the allocation of resources for program evaluation. Program evaluation is needed to provide information for making program as well as policy-making decisions. The results of a national survey, which examined current vs. perceived-ideal procedures for determining program evaluation budgets, implied that educational evaluators need to increase their efforts to communicate evaluation results and encourage educational leaders to use these results. The Task Force recommends the adoption of a common definition of program evaluation; that requests for evaluations be accompanied by a statement of the use to which the evaluations will be put; and, that appropriate funding levels for conducting evaluations be set using a sliding scale. (Author/PN)

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RESOURCE ALLOCATION FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION: A POSITION

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RESOURCE ALLOCATION FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION: A POSITION

BACKGROUND

The Task Force on Resource Allocation for Program Evaluation was established by Division H of the American Educational Research Association at the 1978 Annual Meeting in Toronto. This task force is one of nine such Division H committees looking into a variety of evaluation questions.

This paper presents the recommendations of the Task Force concerning the question of resource allocation for program evaluation. The first section of the paper attempts to establish a rationale or need for the conduct and use of program evaluations. The second section discusses the results of a national survey which examined current vs. perceived-ideal procedures for determining program evaluation budgets. The third and final section of the paper offers three concrete recommendations for future action. The views embodied in this article are the result of an extensive three year effort on the part of the task force membership.

WHY EVALUATE?

Need for Commitment to Program Evaluation

In an era characterized by increasing demands for accountability and dwindling resources, program evaluation has emerged as central to the provision of quality educational programs, and requisite for compliance with state and federal mandates.

In light of mounting public pressure and recent legislative action, LEAs are being forced to scrutinize even more closely the use of shrinking education dollars. Apart from the issue of compliance, many districts are beginning to realize that program evaluation is essential to the effective use of system resources. It is becoming increasingly important for educators to determine what works and what does not in order to expend finite public resources in the most effective and efficient manner. However, few school districts have adequate research and evaluation components. The majority of LEAs throughout the country function, for the most part, without the benefit of these services or are forced to contract with outside consultants as considerable expense. Thus, the question of resource allocation for program evaluation is a pervasive one which must be addressed at the state and federal level, as well as at the local level.

Program evaluation results serve two purposes. First, they provide program staff with information necessary for making program decisions. Second, they provide policy-makers (administrators) with information necessary for making policy decisions. The execution of effective programs, like the formation of effective policy, depends upon one's ability to assess system needs and resources and to interpret both in light of information concerning program worth. The information requirements for administrators parallel those of program staff, that is they both must address the following questions.

1. What are the needs?

2. How are programs being implemented?

3. How effective are the programs?

Program evaluation, as defined by the Task Force, embraces each of the above questions. First, need identification (i.e., program planning) is addressed through context and/or input evaluation. Second, monitoring program operations (i.e., program implementation) is addressed through process evaluation. And third, assessing program outcomes (i.e., program impact) is addressed through product evaluation. Each of these three phases of the evaluation have a profound effect upon both program and policy decisions.

The commitment to use evaluation findings can therefore be seen at two levels: 1) the program level; and 2) the policy level. Recommendations concerning resource allocation for program evaluation must address these specific concerns, as well as the general question of producing usable evaluation findings.

There is perhaps no better expression of a commitment to use of evaluation findings than the adoption of a formal policy statement by local governing boards affirming the same. A straightforward policy statement of commitment to use of evaluation findings would be hard for a local governing board to turn down. People want to know what their tax dollars (or other funds) are buying. There is general agreement that the purpose of educational institutions is to provide learning opportunities for students, not to perpetuate programs or practices that do not produce results.

HOW MUCH EVALUATION IS ENOUGH?

Current vs. Perceived-Ideal Procedures for Determining Evaluation Budgets

The average family spends about as much per year to assess the merit of its children's educational programs as it does to buy school lunches for the same children for one week. This conclusion is based on a 1979 Division H questionnaire survey of 55 local-education-agency (LEAs) and 14 state-education-agency (SEAs) evaluation directors (Note 1). This conclusion accords with results of two other recent national surveys of evaluation activities in U.S. education: one by Lyon, Doscher, McGranahan, and Williams (Note 2); the other by Webster and Stufflebeam (Note 3).

All three surveys suggest that during the late 1970's, U.S. school districts with evaluation units allocated only .3% of their total budgets for evaluation. Other major findings of the Division H survey are listed below.

1. Both smaller (under 40,000 students) and larger school districts spend about $4.00 per pupil for evaluation ($2.00 locally funded) out of a mean per pupil expenditure of $1,500 for the smaller LEAs and $1,700 for the larger LEAs. Of this $4.00, $3.00 is spent on outcome or process evaluation, $.60 on program-planning/needs-assessment, and $.40 on dissemination/utilization.

2. When educational programs have an evaluation component, about 1-5% of the total program budget is ordinarily allocated for evaluation. For some of the largest federally funded programs (e.g., Title I and special education) these evaluation allocations average .5-3%. For federally funded (e.g., Title IV-C) and nonfederal programs emphasizing innovative approaches to education--where documentation of program acceptance and effectiveness may be more strongly emphasized --the percentages of program costs allocated for evaluation seem to average 4.5%.

3. This survey shows that a nationwide sample of heads of LEA evaluation units recommend a range of percentages of program costs for evaluation--from 4-8%, on the average--that exceeds the currently available average percentage-of-program-costs allocations for evaluation.

4. A majority of these LEA evaluation directors (as well as a majority of the SEA evaluation directors represented) recommend a sliding scale approach for determining allocations of program costs for evaluation, with lower percentages as program costs exceed certain levels. A majority of the evaluation units represented currently use such a sliding scale approach, with the evaluation budget determined by the scope of evaluation work required. The current average range of percentages of program costs for evaluation when such sliding scales are used is only about 1.5-5.5%.

5. Overall, about three-fourths of the LEA evaluation directors judged their units' evaluation reports to be an important factor in subsequent program operation; and about half judged these reports important to subsequent decisions concerning program funding. There were modest point-biserial correlations between percentage of total LEA budget allocated for evaluation and (a) influence of evaluation reports on subsequent funding ($\underline{r}$ = .21, $\underline{p}$ = .07, 1-tailed) and (b) influence of evaluation reports on subsequent program operation (r = .24, P = .04, 1-tailed). Thus there is some reason to believe that LEA level of effort for evaluation is related to the usefulness of evaluation activities in decisions concerning program funding and program revision.

6. Comments of these LEA and SEA evaluators suggest possible reasons why evaluation does not have a higher importance in program funding and operation; or, more generally, why evaluation does not have a higher priority among LEA, SEA, and federal educational leadership. According to these respondents, program evaluation is often seen as too costly; educational leaders have little training or experience in using evaluation results; some evaluations lack usefulness because they are inconclusive or carried out independently from program development; and some LEAs apparently do not have enough staff qualified to conduct high quality evaluations.

Since the respondents to the Division H survey questionnaire represent a 35% return rate for LEA evaluators and a 25% return rate for SEA evaluators, caution must be used in generalizing these survey results to the entire intended sample; or to all U.S. LEAs and SEAs. The respondent group does, however, represent a broad geographic distribution, and a large range of LEA and state student-population sizes. Also, the LEAs represented in this survey, taken together, accounted for nearly 7% of the 1977-78 U.S. school-age population.

One implication of the Division H survey appears clear, educational evaluators need to increase their efforts to communicating evaluation results and encouraging educational leaders to use these results. Apparently, of every $10 allocated for analysis of data, only about $1 is spent on efforts to disseminate research results and encourage their use.

Raizen and Rossi (Note 4) paint a simular picture at the Federal level. According to their study, evaluation receives only 5% of approximately $14 billion in federal aid to education. They point out that a report by the National Research Council suggested that Congress must be more specific about what it wants from evaluations of educational programs. And finally, they conclude that results of evaluation studies conducted for the Education Department generally do not get out to the field, and proceed to suggest that at a minimum evaluation findings must be communicated to the primary audience.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Three Recommendations

The Division H Task Force on Resource Allocation has developed three recommendations concerning the funding of program evaluation activities. The first two recommendations address important preconditions which should be present prior to establishing an evaluation budget, while the third recommendation focuses on setting appropriate funding levels for conducting evaluations using a sliding scale.

NUMBER 1 Federal, State and Local Education Agencies should adopt a common definition of program evaluation which is consistent with the Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials promulgated by The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1981. This definition whould embrace the full range of evaluation activity from program planning (need-assessment) to process or implementation evaluation through product or outcome evaluation to dissemination.

All too often those who commission evaluation studies define program evaluation in very narrow terms. In most cases evaluation is used synonymously with testing or assessment programs. This tendency not only serves as a barrier to effective communication between the evaluator and the sponsor, but also tends to distort the amount of support (funds) needed to conduct program evaluation activities.

Assessment and testing programs do have a role to play in assisting educators with the evaluation of program outcomes, namely by providing a ready data base. However, to neglect other evaluation considerations such as program development, monitoring and dissemination of results seriously undermines the resource allocation process.

Therefore, the Task Force recommends the adoption of a common definition of program evaluation, one which embraces the full range of evaluation concerns from planning to dissemination of results.

NUMBER 2 Individuals or groups who commission evaluation studies must clearly delineate the uses to which evaluation findings will be put, as well as the anticipated level of dissemination. These two pieces of information are essential when calculating the level of support required for any one program evaluation effort. Knowledge of the purpose(s) of the evaluation and its potential audience not only influences funding and resource levels, but also impacts on methodological questions.

Therefore, the Task Force recommends that requests for evaluations be accompanied by a statement of the use to which the evaluation data will be put, as well as the projected scope of dissemination efforts.

NUMBER 3 Based upon Task Force survey data (Note 1), it appears that the most reasonable approach to setting evaluation budgets involves the use of a sliding scale. For the typical program evaluation (i.e., one which encompasses program planning; process evaluation; product evaluation; and dissemination) the optional level of support appears to range from 4 to 8 percent of the total program budget.

Our survey revealed that of every $10 allocated for evaluation, slightly over $4 was spent on product or outcome evaluation activities; $3, on process or implementation data gathering; nearly $2, on program planning and needs assessment; and $1, on dissemination and utilization. These average proportions of funds spent during each evaluation phase were similar for both large and small LEAs.

However, variability among LEAs in the proportion of evaluation funds spent on each phase was quite high, particularly for the product/outcome and process/implementation phases. These results are not surprising given that program evaluations differ greatly in purpose and intent. About half of the LEAs reported spending 30-50% of evaluation funds during the product/outcome evaluation phase; and about half spent 20-40% during process/implementation evaluation. Only 6% of the LEAs reported spending more than 20% of evaluation funds in dissemination and use of data.

The variable nature of evaluation studies make it difficult to approach resource allocation as an exact science. Several factors interact with the overall purpose and intent of an evaluation to make budgeting a tricky business. Once again the Task Force survey provides valuable insight into the question of what factors lead to a higher or lower than average level of support for evaluation activities. Sixty-nine LEA and SEA evaluation directors were asked for written responses to two questions: "What are some of the factors which would make a program evaluation cost more than the normal range?" and "What are some of the factors which would make an evaluation cost less . . . ?"

Measurement and instrumentation factors leading to higher than average costs were: (1) field collection of interview and observational data, in addition to collection of paper-and-pencil data (22% of respondents); (2) developing new or original tests or questionnaires (20%); (3) purchasing commercially available tests or questionnaires (9%); and (4) a large number of different instruments and measures required by the evaluation design (7%).

Other evaluation features or requirements leading to nigher than average costs were large program size or complexity (14%); complex evaluation design--e.g., control groups, evaluation audit, etc.--(10%); and heavy data analysis and reporting requirements (10%).

Measurement and instrumentation factors leading to more economical evaluation included: (1) using already available data, and/or already purchased or developed tests and questionnaires (16%); (2) evaluators and program staff share the work or cost of data collection--including use of diagnostic tests usable for both program operation and evaluation (7%); and (3) a small number of different instruments and measures required (6%).

Other evaluation features or requirements leading to lower costs were light data analysis and reporting requirements (10%); small program size or complexity (6%); and a design that is elegantly simple, or evaluation procedures that are familiar or well standardized (6%).

Reference Notes

1. Drezek, S., Monkowski, P. G., & Higgins, P. S. "Current vs. perceived-ideal procedures for determining educational program-evaluation budgets: A survey of school evaluators." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, in press.

2. Lyon, C. D., Doscher, L., McGranahan, P., & Williams, R. Evaluation and School Districts. Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Center for the Study of Evaluation, December 1978.

3. Webster, U. J., & Stufflebeam, D. L. "The state of theory and practice in educational evaluation in large urban school districts." Invited address presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, Ontario, March 1978.

4. Raizen, S. & Rossi, P. Program Evaluation: When? How? To What End? Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1980.